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ABSTRACT

This brief paper summarizes research on effective instruction in writing for students with learning disabilities. It finds that three components stand out as methods that reliably and consistently lead to improved outcomes in teaching expressive writing to these students. These components are: (1) adhering to a basic framework of planning, writing, and revision; (2) explicitly teaching critical steps in the writing process; and (3) providing feedback guided by the information explicitly taught. The paper also notes two specific teaching methodologies that incorporate these three principles: first, Self-Regulated Strategy Development, which involves self-directed prompts, and second, Cognitive Strategy Instruction in Writing, which focuses on pre-writing strategies. Emerging issues in writing instruction are identified, including the mechanics versus the content of writing, dictation as a means of eliminating mechanical difficulties of expressive writing, and transfer of writing skills and related strategies to other subject-matter areas. (Contains 10 references.) (DB)

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Teaching Expressive Writing To Students with Learning Disabilities

Russell Gersten, Scott Baker and Lana Edwards

A recent meta-analysis (Gersten & Baker, 1999) highlights research-based instructional approaches for teaching written expression to students with learning disabilities, including ways to teach students how to analyze material learned in the classroom and how to write personal narratives, persuasive essays, and other genres. All of the instructional interventions studied improved the quality of students' written products, and there was evidence of positive impact on students' self-efficacy, i.e., their senses of being able to write.

Expressive writing was defined as *writing for the purpose of displaying knowledge or supporting self-expression* (Graham & Harris, 1989a). This analysis asked, "Given a group of studies designed explicitly for the purpose of improving the writing of students with learning disabilities, which interventions and components were found to be most effective, and what is the strength of their effects?" This definition and research question led the analysis to include studies of a various interventions.

Virtually all of the interventions studied were multifaceted. Three components stood out as ones that reliably and consistently led to improved outcomes in teaching expressive writing to students with learning disabilities:

- Adhering to a basic framework of planning, writing, and revision;
- Explicitly teaching critical steps in the writing process and
- Providing feedback guided by the information explicitly taught

Adhering To A Basic Framework of Planning, Writing, and Revision

Teaching students to write requires showing them how to develop and organize what they want to say and guiding them in the process of getting it down on paper. Most of the interventions used a basic framework based on planning, writing, and revising. These steps are part of a recursive, rather than linear, process, i.e., each step may be revisited during the writing process, and the steps do not always proceed in the same order. In these studies, each step was taught explicitly, with several examples and often supported by a "think sheet," a prompt card, or a mnemonic.

Planning. Well-developed plans for writing result in better first drafts. Teachers or peers who write well can verbalize the process they go through to help students develop their own "plans of action." One type of plan of action, called a "Planning Think Sheet," uses a series of sequential, structured prompts. It specifies a topic and asks the questions, "Who (am I writing for)?," "Why am I writing?," "What do I know?," "How can I group my ideas?," and "How will I organize my ideas?" (Englert, Raphael & Anderson, 1992). Another technique is to use semantic mapping to help students plan their writing.

Creating a first draft. Using a plan of action helps students create first drafts. The plan serves as a concrete map for engaging in the writing process and provides students with suggestions for what to do when they feel "stuck." The plan of action provides a permanent reminder of the content and structure of the writing task.

A well-developed plan of action also gives the student and teacher a common language to use in discussing the writing. The dialogue between teacher and student represents a major advance in writing instruction over traditional methods that required students to work in relative isolation.

Revising and editing. Revising and editing skills are critical to the writing process. Developing methods to help students refine and edit their work has been difficult, but a few researchers have begun to develop specific strategies that appear promising. For example, Wong, Butler, Ficzer, and Kuperis (1996), in teaching students to write opinion essays, used peer editing as an instructional strategy for the students. Pairs of students alternated their roles as student-writer and student-critic. The student-critic identified ambiguities in the essay and asked the writer for clarification. With help from the teacher, the students made revisions. The teacher also provided the student-writer with feedback on clarity and on the cogency of the supportive arguments. Once the clarity and cogency of the essay met the teacher's standard, the pair moved on to correct capitalization, spelling, and punctuation. Through this process, the student-writer had to explain his or her communicative intent to the peer and revise the essay to faithfully reflect it. These clarifying interactive dialogues led the student-critic and student-writer to understand each other's perspective. In this way the trainees developed a sense of audience for their writing.

Explicitly Teaching Critical Steps in the Writing Process

Explicitly teaching text structures provides a guide for the writing task, whether it is a persuasive essay, a personal narrative, or an essay comparing and contrasting two phenomena. Different types of writing are based on different structures. For example, a persuasive essay contains a thesis and supporting arguments, while narrative writing may contain character development and a story climax. Instruction in text structures typically includes numerous explicit models and prompts. Although different writers may proceed with the structures in a different order, good writing involves what Englert & Mariage (1991) called "overlapping and recursive processes." These processes do not proceed in a particular order, and one process may inform another in such a way that the author returns to previous steps to update or revise on a regular basis. Again, a plan of action is helpful. The plan makes text structures more visible to students and helps to demystify the writing process.

Providing Feedback Guided by the Information Explicitly Taught

A third component common to these successful interventions was frequent feedback to students on the overall quality of writing, missing elements, and strengths. When feedback is combined with instruction in the writing process, the dialogue between student and teacher is strengthened. Giving and receiving feedback also helps students to develop "reader sensitivity" and their own writing style.

Wong et al. (1997) hypothesized that interactive dialogues, which led students through multiple cycles of reflection, realization, and redress of problems, helped students "see" their thoughts and write from another's perspective. Across the studies of successful writing instruction, teachers and students had an organizational framework and language to use in providing feedback on such aspects of writing as organization, originality, and interpretation. Wong and her colleagues modeled procedures, for students and teachers, providing feedback so that they would attend to the surface features of writing (e.g., spelling and punctuation) as well as to the presentation of ideas.

Specific Methods

Numerous methods for teaching written expression incorporate these three common principles. Two examples are Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) (Graham & Harris, 1989b) and Cognitive Strategy Instruction in Writing (Englert et al., 1995; Englert & Mariage, 1991).

The SRSD technique involves self-directed prompts that require the students to (a) consider their audience and reasons for writing, (b) develop a plan for what they intend to say using frames to generate or organize writing notes; (c) evaluate possible content by considering its impact on the reader; and (d) continue the process of content generation and planning during the act of writing.

Cognitive Strategy Instruction in Writing includes brainstorming strategies for preparing to write, organizing strategies to relate and categorize the ideas, comprehension strategies as students read and gather information for their writing, and monitoring strategies as they clarify their thoughts and the relationships among their items of information. All of these strategies are applied prior to the actual writing.

Emerging Issues in Writing Instruction for Students with Learning Disabilities

Gersten and Baker (1999) identify some issues in which research is expected to blossom in coming years. The first group of issues concerns the mechanics versus the content of writing. Early evidence suggested that writing instruction that focused more on content would better capitalize on the strengths of students with learning disabilities. When asked to write about complex ideas, students with learning disabilities often showed conceptual performance beyond that which would be expected on the basis of their performance on lower-level skills such as capitalization, punctuation and spelling (Goldman, Hasselbring, & The Cognition Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1977).

More recent research indicates that dictating to a scribe can eliminate mechanical difficulties and result in a longer, higher-quality composition (e.g., De La Paz & Graham, 1997). While

students must eventually learn to do their own writing, these findings suggest a possible bridge to higher performance.

Gersten and Baker point out that daily writing instruction should include time devoted to both the mechanics and the process of writing. Problems with the mechanics of writing must be addressed in expressive writing instruction; there is a reciprocal relationship between mastery of transcription skills and growth in the quality of writing. When students have mastered the mechanics, their cognitive resources can be devoted to planning, composing, and revising their work.

According to Gersten and Baker, another issue that is likely to be the focus of expressive writing research is the transfer of writing skills and the spontaneous use of the strategies involved in writing to other subject matter areas to raise the student's overall level of academic achievement. In the meta-analysis reported here, few investigated the transfer of writing skills. Those that did found mixed results. Wong called for instruction to promote transfer of skill. When students are provided such opportunities, she says, transfer will be greatly enhanced.

Based on *Teaching Expressive Writing To Students With Learning Disabilities: A Meta-Analysis* by Russell Gersten and Scott Baker, 1999.

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